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## For Ballard, little fixes may add up

There's been a lot of talk recently about the 2011 race for mayor. Democratic challengers are already lining up to take on Mayor Greg Ballard, and the mayor has taken what his people call "concrete steps" toward a re-election bid.

It all seems premature, of course. Children not yet conceived will be walking and talking before voters head to the polls in 26 months. Oh, well. It's always fun to think about the next election.

The prevailing view is that Ballard won the mayor's office in 2007 thanks to a wild confluence of events that might never be topped. That's true. But another view shared by many -- that Ballard should be easy to beat in a more routine election year -- is worth reconsidering.

That's the thought I had Thursday afternoon, as Ballard talked with reporters and editors from The Indianapolis Star about his administration's proposed 2010 city and county budget. For more than an hour, Ballard and his team made exactly the case that could make him hard to beat two years from now: that it's all about the nuts and bolts of the city.

Ballard talked about the much-improved system of repairing potholes. He told how his administration has freed up more money to repair roads and sidewalks. And he spoke of things such as an "integrated financial management system" that is helping streamline government. While that might sound sleep-inducing, it's all home-run stuff for the mayor.

The thing to remember about Ballard is this: The more he talks about the nitty gritty -- the little things that make a community livable -- the better he'll do come 2011.

So when he rattled off statistics showing how quickly the city now distributes garbage containers, he was doing exactly the right thing. When he gets excited about "a culture of process improvements" at the City-County Building, he was pitching the perfect message.

Ballard is never going to be the Orator of the Year, and he's not going to be the darling of the city's movers and shakers. What he can be -- and what his political advisers hope he will be in 2011 -- is the guy who spent four years working on the little things that add up to a city's quality of life. Things such as streets, sidewalks, crime and taxes.

Or, as his superstar financial chief David Reynolds said, "the blocking and tackling" of government.

Ballard took a beating earlier in the year during the state legislative debate over a bailout of the Capital Improvement Board, which manages the city's sports and convention facilities. He might take another hit later this year when the city reopens negotiations with the money-losing Indiana Pacers.

But the mayor is in political nirvana these days. It's budget season -- and that plays to his strengths. Even as other cities across the nation slash programs and fire workers, Ballard is pushing a budget that doesn't lay off staff but does increase public safety spending and leaves \$16 million in a

previously depleted rainy day fund.

This, even though the city has taken a roughly \$30 million hit because of new state-imposed property tax caps, which Ballard supported.

Many of the administration's accomplishments, Ballard said, are not "whiz bang stuff." True. But they are crucial to making people feel comfortable about living here.

The challenge is making sure spending cuts don't leave the city tattered. Take the parks, for instance. Ballard promises that a reduction in parks spending will be offset by private funding and improved maintenance processes. Let's hope so.

The Ballard era has had its ups and downs. But as the mayor reaches the halfway point of his term, he appears to be settling in quite smoothly.